CLICHE OR CONFESSION?
Matthew 16:13-23
September 8, 1974

Christ. . .[redacted]. . .Savior. . .Son of God. . .Son of Man. . .[redacted]... Rabbi. . .Teacher. . .Master. . .King of the Jews. . .Swinburne called him J.C. + "my sweet Lord" ("the pale Galilean"). . .more recently he has been called Superstar: "[redacted] the power of Jesus' name. Let angels prostrate fall: bring forth the royal diadem and crown him Lord of all:" is the way the favorite hymn puts it.

Who was he? Or is it present tense? Who is he? Does it matter? Does it really matter what you believe about this man? Does it make any difference by what name you call him: or by what particular set of intellectual categories you define him?

Coming at it from a slightly different perspective, is this the time -- all things considered -- to be discussing what the theologians call "Christology"? Wouldn't it make more sense, and be more politic, to smooth off the cutting edge of particularity regarding Jesus: to confine ourselves to safer generalities: to find that common ground we share with all religions, and all men of good will for that matter?

There is a part of us that wants to answer in the affirmative. We've had enough of Christian arrogance and parochialism and provincialism. We've had enough of theological imperialism that simply dismissed the wisdom and beauty of other religions in years past. It is not, obviously, the time in history to isolate ourselves behind walls of doctrine -- in a culture and a world that is already walled off and divided enough.

And yet, if our experience in the erstwhile Ecumenical movement has taught us anything it is that unity and common mission result not when people try to reduce their differences by the least common denominator, but when they stand honestly & confidently in their own traditions.

Presbyterians are far better able to join hands with Methodists, Lutherans and Catholics when they know why they are Presbyterians, rather than shrugging off their particularity as inconsequential. Honest and creative dialogue happens between Christians and Jews: Christians and Marxists -- not when we try to demonstrate that we're really not that different after all, but when all parties affirm and live their own particularity.

Does it matter what you call the man? Is the cutting and sometimes abrasive edge of the incarnation important for modern Christians? Of course it is -- now as never before. In a culture that is fond of the sentiment that "it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you believe something," it is imperative that Christian people know who they are -- and why they are who they are. And that leads us back across the centuries to an incident that happened when this man turned to his twelve friends and asked: "Who do you say that I am?"

Let's reconstruct. It happened at the apex of his career, just before it took a sharp turn downward on the long road of humiliation, suffering and death. The crowds at this point were still with him: people were literally flocking to see and hear the words of this new Rabbi out of Nazareth. What opposition there was, was confined to the cities, surfacing in the form of an occasional Scribe or Pharisee who sought him out in order to gather evidence and report it to the authorities. But in terms of popularity it was the high point in his life.

And so one day when they were in the vicinity of Caesarea Phillipi he took a reading: ("How are we doing? What are people saying about me? Who do men say that the Son of Man is?") The disciples reached immediately into their collection of superlatives: "Some are saying John the Baptist. But better yet some are comparing you favorably with those heroic luminaries out of our past --

Elijah -- Jeremiah". That, by the way, was a very high honor: men ordinarily do not enjoy that kind of compliment until after they are dead and gone. What it tells us is that people were reacting very favorably to Jesus -- even though their superlative comparison with Elijah and Jeremiah quite missed the point. Jesus, apparently, didn't respond at all to the report. Instead, he did something very significant. characteristic + He turned the question to them. It's one thing to report on what other people think -- to read all the books, to check all the authorities, to know all the proper quotes. It is an entirely different thing to be compelled to answer personally: to make personal testimony. ("But you - who do you say that I am?")

Peter answered: ("You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God".) That was what he was looking for. Had any of them seen the truth yet: had any broken through to that secret he was carrying in his heart? And so he said; ("Blessed are you Peter: you couldn't have figured that out by yourself: God has revealed it to you. I am the one who was promised: I am the fulfillment. "

If they knew that -- that he was the Christ - the Messiah -- they were ~~ready~~ prepare to understand that he must suffer and die. And so Jesus began to lay out before the twelve what he saw in store for himself. And again it was Peter, blurting out ("God forbid, Lord. This shall never happen to you".) The breakthrough hadn't lasted very long. For one fleeting moment in time Peter had seemed to understand, but now, with this brave but mistaken reaction revealed that he did not yet comprehend the essential thing about the Christ: namely, a love that would make him vulnerable . . . a love big enough to suffer and die. ~~Jesus was as rough on Peter at that moment, rougher in fact, than on anyone else. "Get behind me Satan!"~~

Now that is a very important New Testament incident for a number of reasons: chief among them the fact that the question Jesus asked: "[redacted]u [redacted]" and Peter's momentary confession "[redacted]

~~Son of the living God~~" have been at the heart of the Christian experience in every generation. It is a question that will not be ignored. And more to the point, it is a question that will not be answered by referring to what other people think. "Who do you say that I am?"

The dilemma for me in this text, is that the issue that is here so very important -- the individual's response to Jesus Christ -- is simply not much of an issue any more. This Central Christian affirmation -- this confession of Peter's that Jesus himself called a revelation of God -- is in our day, I would submit, little more than a cliche.

Partially, I suppose, it is a result of living 20 centruies after the fact -- in a civilization heavily influenced by Christian tradition. It is a little difficult to sense the importance of a personal response to the question: ("Who do you say that I am") in a culture that baptizes everybody with piety. + assumes that everyone is a Christian...

Partially, I suppose, it is a result of knowing -- as Peter did not -- how the story ends. We know about Easter. Peter hadn't been there yet. - and couldn't possibly have imagined what would transpire..

And so, I submit -- the confession becomes a cliche. The radical impact of the events reported in the New Testament doesn't get through to us. When Peter says: ("You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God",) instead of gasping in astonishment we retort ["Big deal: doesn't everybody know that?"]

By conscious, disciplined act of will we have ~~to clean our minds and~~ +u try to stand where the disciples stood. Helmut Thielicke observes: ["Peter feels himself driven to a confession the madness of which hardly hits us anymore because, in the meantime, the words have become all too familiar. But at the time the confession was uttered, it must have been a powerful shock to those who heard it".] (How to Believe Again P42)

~~Even though~~ Our life-long familiarity with the Gospel ~~may have~~ has softened its radical claims, the New Testament consistantly portrays a man to whom people responded in one way or another. Again Thielicke puts it almost poetically: "Wherever the Savior shows up everything, including the opposition is aroused & swings into action. He awakens homesickness in the prodigal but hate springs up in the Elder Brother . . .there are men who find peace through him, but Judas too goes to work" (P39)

Jesus himself ruled out the option of not responding to him. Here he asked the disciples directly what they thought. But at other times his behavior literally forced people to react. When he healed the sick, he also forgave their sins -- ~~an act of outright blasphemy~~: he claimed that in him the Kingdom of God was present among men. A first century Jew simply could not hear those things -- see those things -- and not react .

Today with the exception of some young people who are happily rediscovering the appeal of the man -- ~~and [illegible]~~, the universal response to Jesus Christ is a blase shrug of the shoulders. If there is one thing the world seems to be saying to the church, it is this: "Whatever you are claiming about Jesus in your esoteric doctrines and old creeds, it just doesn't matter very much." And all too frequently that is precisely what the church says back to the world: "You're right: it's not very important. We'd like you to join our organization: support our building project: cook in our kitchen and serve on our committees. But let's not get bogged down in semantics; let's not allow Jesus Christ to get in the way".

That, it seems to me, presents the modern church -- and modern Christians -- with the most important task of all, if we are not to be assimilated and reduced right out of existence in the next generation: to be honest about Jesus Christ: ~~to clear out the underbrush~~: to wipe the theological slate clean

and stand again with Peter as that piercing question is asked: "But who do you say that I am?"

I am not suggesting that every person who calls himself a Christian must be able to articulate a theology of the incarnation that would satisfy an examining board of seminary professors. In fact, I would suggest that our approach to the Christian faith is often times too cerebral -- too academic. Too often we equate faith with understanding: being a Christian with agreeing to a list of doctrines. William Temple once observed that a man who claims to understand the relationship of humanity to divinity in Christ shows that he doesn't know what is meant by an incarnation." So we are not talking solely about understanding - [illegible]

[illegible] The early church resolved a divisive debate over the nature of Christ by writing the Nicene Creed - using philosophic concepts that are alive to the modern western mind.

Where to begin then? Where do we find the words and ideas through which to express our convictions about Jesus Christ and to affirm the particularity of our faith?

Elton Trueblood suggests that we must go back beyond the creeds of the church, beyond all the phrases we have learned and begin, simply, with what we know. ("Look at the evidence",) he advises. Time is dated on the basis of the birth of Jesus Christ. That is a fact. Lives have been dramatically changed by him and the power he let loose in history: not just a few, but millions upon millions of lives. That is another fact. History has been changed. . .when you consider the whole expanse of history, Karl Marx is not sufficiently revolutionary even to be mentioned in the same breath as Jesus Christ. That too is a fact.

Following that line of reasoning a whole new school of theologians are insisting today that personal Christian faith begins at the point of confronting and understanding and affirming the humanity of Christ. I believe they are correct. Orthodox doctrine insists that he was both man and God: human and divine. But all too often his humanity -- his commonality with us -- is a casualty of our theologizing.

The New Testament begins with it. He was not, as we sometimes seem to believe, an insertion from outside history -- but one born in history -- like everybody else. His genes and chromosomes and cells were not fakes, but the real thing. In Matthew's and Luke's accounts long geneologies trace his ties with the human family back to Abraham and Adam and God. This was not, they were saying, a divine being coming out of no where, but God coming into the life of the world through the ordinary life of an ordinary first century Jew.

The uniqueness of Jesus Christ is precisely here. In the life of a man God did something new. This life -- became the way God chose to reveal his love to all men: this life became the normative human life. In all his freedom and integrity and compassion, Jesus Christ was God acting in history -- and at the same time a man living life as God intended for all men to live.

Regardless of what else we want to say about Christ, may I suggest that an authentic confession begins with the fact that he was one of us. Every feeling you ever had was experienced by Jesus. Every fear of death you ever felt - was felt by him. He got tired and angry and disappointed and frustrated as you and I do. When they crucified him it hurt -- and as he died he too wondered why God had abandoned him.

Cliches have a way of disappearing when we finally acknowledge that this man - about whom so much has been written and said - was one of us.

There is a pop song that goes, ("Put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee".) And the real significance of that affirmation is that the hand of Jesus does not lift us out of this "vale of tears" but rather is scorched and scarred by life along with our own.

That's what Peter did not know. He did not yet see that this man, in whom God was acting, would go all the way with him and for him. He did not yet know about a love that suffers and dies in order to express itself. But we do...

John Baillie, in an essay exploring the various theologies with which men have described Jesus, summed up in these words:

"I do know that it is the constraint of Jesus Christ from which I find it most impossible to escape. I just cannot read the Gospel story without knowing that I am being sought out in love. . .I am not now arguing. I am only confessing" (A Reasoned Faith. P118-119)

So it is for us. Our response to Jesus Christ is called out of us by that love; not intellectually -- out of our minds - but out of our hearts. We may not always fully understand. We may not be able to explain. In the Presbyterian tradition one becomes a church member, not by reciting an elaborate theological formula -- but by responding to Jesus Christ - in an eloquently simple, personal confession: " I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior - I trust him - I intend to follow him". (and we have a multitude)

And we remain in Christian faith, I would suggest, on that same basis. By going back daily to that incident near Caesarea Phillipi: back past all the cliches - all the creeds - all the ecclesiastical trappings - and confronting the man Jesus. "Who do you say that I am?" And confessing, in whatever words we have, "You are the Christ - you are what life means to me - you are my teacher - my friend - my companion - my Lord: and you I would follow". Amen.

Father, break through our cliches, our comfortable and wordy theologies, and help us to see Jesus, our brother, who lived, as one of us and died for us. Amen.